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Introduction: A New Wave of Youth Activism in Asia

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Introduction

A New Wave of Youth Activism in Asia

Edward Aspinall, Meredith L. Weiss, and Colm A. Fox

Over the last decade, a massive wave of student and youth protest has swept through Northeast and Southeast Asia. Since the mid-2010s, regime-shaking protest movements have erupted in countries as diverse as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and China. Some have achieved near-revolutionary intensity, exerting enormous political pressure on ruling regimes and bringing previously verboten political issues to the forefront of national debate. Even in countries not at the forefront of this surge, youth have mobilized in new and potentially highly consequential ways. Amid wider democratic backsliding across much of Asia, and with regimes recalcitrantly intolerant of pushback, governments have responded with a mixture of repression and concessions.

This book investigates the nature of, impetuses behind, and implications of these new episodes of student and youth protest across the region. The chapters to come identify shared patterns among demands, tactical repertoires, and networks, but also what differentiates protest movements across countries and over time. Drawing on original fieldwork and, in many cases, their own experience, our authors introduce a gamut of modes of organization, mobilization, and messaging, both online and on the ground; and an efflorescence of identities and attendant claims, from feminist to LGBTQ to ethnic minority to Islamist. Our contributors examine, too, new cross-border collaborations and transnational linkages that have helped to amplify a sense of a distinctly "Asian" protest cycle.

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Taken together, these case studies offer important theoretical interventions. First, while contemporary youth may work in coalition with other segments, their prominence suggests that democratic backsliding and reversal can have specific generational effects; while earlier explanations for the special stature and agency of students lack the analytic leverage they once had, democratic backsliding does still seem to prompt mobilization especially among younger citizens. Second, the extent to which present-day youth mobilization has been in urban centers (e.g., Beissinger 2022) and (especially) online argues for revisioning political space. Not only is the sphere rightly inclusive of digital platforms, but novel forms of performance capitalize on both the city as backdrop and the potential for online virality and network-building, even as repression can also permeate through these spaces (Lim 2023). Importantly, urban spaces and online settings encourage fundamentally different internalized boundaries and identities, of who the "we" of protest includes. Third, this wave of activism embodies intersectionality and allyship in ways that blur, too, the empirical and analytical lines between movement beneficiaries and conscience constituents (Klandermans et al. 2015).

Before delving into this wave, let us clarify our terminology and the scope of this volume. We focus on "youth" and "student" activism, although the boundaries of these categories are notoriously hazy. At times, these categories overlap—but not always. Here, we loosely define "youth" as under 30, acknowledging regional variations. Official organizations for youth in Malaysia, for instance, set the cutoff as high as 40; other groups, at least in practice, might be of and for activists in their twenties. "Student" is equally ambiguous. Most of the student activists we address in the volume are university students, specifically undergraduates. But many of those participating in protests, for example in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Thailand, have been secondary school students. Others, most dramatically in Myanmar, have held onto the moniker "student" long after their enrollment has ended, whether because of their own detention or the closure of their universities. The meanings of these categories are as complex as their boundaries. While "youth" and "student" often suggest inexperience, even naivete, in many Asian countries, they carry powerful legacies of nationalist and pro-democracy mobilization, and thus of political agency and impact. (Chapters in Weiss and Aspinall 2012 explore these connections further.) Our contributors specify when the categories they use diverge from these norms, situating contemporary efforts within national histories of youth political action.

Throughout, we define "activism" broadly as any action aimed at social and political change. This lens encompasses clear-cut cases of pro-democracy

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street protests, but also less confrontational, even under-the-radar actions to bring about change. For example, Fauziah Mayangsari (chapter 2) and Bertrand Seah (chapter 9) explore students' use of research papers to sway policymakers, while Mu'izz Abdul Khalid (chapter 12) highlights Bruneian youths' "quiet activism" through NGOs, avoiding even being labeled "activists." Finally, we understand activism as not only progressive. While most cases we address are "pro-democratic," chapters also examine right-wing and socially conservative activism, from pro-Duterte youth in the Philippines (Juhn Chris Espia, chapter 14) to antifeminist Islamist students in Indonesia (Dyah Ayu Kartika, chapter 8).

In this introduction, we briefly sketch the recent wave of protest and its historical context. We then discuss four key driving forces, or distinctive features, of this activism: its relationship to regional democratic decline; its participants' deep engagement with new communication technologies, especially social media; its reinvigoration of transnational solidarity; and its emphasis on intersectional or coalitional politics. We conclude with an overview of the chapters to come.

Student and Youth Activism in Asia in Historical Context

While young people have never been silent in the region, their activism ratcheted up in the 2010s, globally and in Asia, coalescing into a loosely coordinated, regime-focused wave by the middle of the decade. Hong Kong's Scholarism, an activist group led by secondary school students, was among the first movers, occupying the Hong Kong legislature in 2012 and obliging the government to withdraw a controversial new "moral and national education" curriculum (Morris and Vickers 2015). Two years later, Taiwan's Sunflower Movement saw students launch a 24-day occupation of Taiwan's legislature, initially to protest a trade deal with China, but eventually spawning "the biggest pro-democracy protest rally in the island's history" (Rowen 2015, 5). A few months later, partly inspired by that campaign, students in Hong Kong, organized through Scholarism and other groups, began an Occupy Central movement. This campaign echoed tropes of the global anticapitalist Occupy and Indignados movements that galvanized youth from Wall Street to Kuala Lumpur to Madrid in 2011–12 (Bernardi 2016). Occupy Central soon transformed into the Umbrella Movement, in which protesters called for universal suffrage and garnered active support from a large slice of Hong Kong's population—exemplifying the extent to which youth have worked in coalition with others (Lee and Chan 2015; Ortmann 2015). A few

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years later, the Hong Kong protesters returned, mobilizing throughout 2019 and 2020 in response to a new extradition law, creating what Shue Fung Chow (chapter 1) calls "a full-scale anti-government revolution."

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, 2015 saw the apex of the Bersih (Clean) movement. Initially centered around electoral reform when it formed in 2007, Bersih increasingly shifted its focus to ousting Prime Minister Najib Razak and his administration as the scope of a major corruption scandal became clear following the 2013 elections. Older activists took the lead, but youth—many too young even to vote—were the core activists in a series of protests that soared to an estimated half-million participants in 2015 (Ong 2022). In Indonesia, students took to the streets in 2019 and 2020, to protest the gutting of Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Commission and laws they viewed as destroying the spirit of the earlier Reformasi democratization movement. Then, in Thailand, throughout 2020 and 2021, loose coalitions of students, youth, and other groups launched a groundswell of protests, stepping up mobilization and networking that had begun on a smaller scale after coups in 2006 and 2014 (Horatanakun 2023). Triggered by the Constitutional Court-ordered dissolution of the antimilitary, pro-democracy Future Forward Party, protesters condemned the government of former coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha. They called for democratization and, unprecedentedly, for reform of the monarchy. The militancy and scale of the protests and the radicalism of activists' demands suggested Thailand "to be undergoing revolutionary change" (Horatanakun 2023, 1). In Myanmar, too, the 2021 military coup "triggered a broad and strong anti-coup mobilization," in which students and other youth played a leading role. This movement deployed "economic, symbolic, political, and armed forms of resistance," aiming at "a federal democratic revolution" (Stokke and Kyaw 2024, 2). In a surprising turn, a series of youth-led protests then erupted in China in late 2022 against stringent COVID-19 lockdown policies. Although smaller than protests in neighboring countries, this A4 Protest was arguably the most significant wave of protests in China since Tiananmen Square in 1989, with unusually direct condemnations of the ruling Communist Party (Chan 2023).

Many young people who participated in these protests faced severe consequences. In the Philippines, students who protested against populist president Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22) were commonly "red-tagged"—labeled as communists or terrorists—to justify targeting them with state or vigilante violence (Espia, chapter 14, this volume). Hong Kong and Thai authorities arrested thousands of young protesters, charging and convicting many under Hong Kong's repressive National Security Law or Thailand's lèse-majesté

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law. Others have been forced into exile to avoid arrest. The Myanmar military's crackdown on pro-democracy activists has been particularly brutal. At the time of writing (February 2026), the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners estimates that the junta has killed over 7,700 people, and nearly 23,000 others are currently detained or imprisoned (see https://aappb.org/).

All told, these youth-led revolts have been remarkable in their scope and energy, placing Asia at the heart of what has been called the global "mass protest decade" of the 2010s (Bevins 2023). As of late 2024, however, none of these movements had achieved their main goals, apart from Taiwan's Sunflower Movement. This movement not only prevented the ratification of the Cross-Strait Agreement on Trade in Services that had sparked it but also contributed to the electoral defeat of the Kuomintang in 2016, bringing to power politicians supportive of progressive causes such as same-sex marriage and Indigenous people's rights. Although efforts in other countries fell short of success, their impact has been significant. They have exerted considerable pressure on targeted regimes, brought new issues and demands to the center of public debate, shifted political discourse, and, in some cases, secured policy concessions or influenced voting behavior.

Of course, as explosive and disruptive as these student and youth movements have been, such mobilization is not new to the region. Each of the countries at the forefront of the current surge, and several that have been less central, have long histories of sporadic or recurrent student and youth protests. In several countries, including China, Indonesia, and Korea, young people played leading roles in nationalist struggles in the early or mid-twentieth century, imbuing the category of "youth" or "student" with special status in national origin stories. In even more, including China, Indonesia, South Korea, Myanmar, and Thailand, students and youth have been at the vanguard of more recent efforts for democratization and regime change. In some cases, student protest succeeded in igniting broad popular movements that capsized authoritarian regimes (such as in Thailand in 1973 and Indonesia in 1998). Contemporary activists, aware of these historical precedents, have invoked earlier struggles—for instance, Indonesian students in 2019 proclaimed Reformasi Dikorupsi (Reform Corrupted), recalling the 1998 Reformasi movement, and their counterparts in Myanmar not only cite, but connect with and learn from, earlier generations of activists, including the now-venerable 88 Generation (Jordt et al. 2021, 18–19). Or they have emulated or built upon inherited traditions, such as Thai students and youth who have sought to connect with militant traditions of the 1970s (Horatanakun 2023 and chapter 3, this volume), while Malaysian youth draw inspiration from activists of the 1960s and 1970s (Soon 2018). Yet youth-led movements

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can be critical of such progenitors. In Timor-Leste, for example, students protest the corrupt and illiberal practices of independence-era leaders from the 1970s and 1990s who now wield political power (Tillman and Webster, chapter 10, this volume).

In many respects, however, these movements are distinctively novel twenty-first-century phenomena, marked as much by their differences from earlier generations of protest as by their continuities with them. They deploy novel modes of protest—most obviously, they rely heavily on social media and other online platforms, including pop-culture references and symbols, engage new identity categories, and propound innovative collective-action frames. So how should we understand this latest wave of student and youth protest in terms of its driving forces and features? Four sets of factors emerge as especially important; we consider each in turn.

Resisting Authoritarianism and Democratic Decline

Mass youth movements, especially university student movements, often erupt with dramatic effect under an authoritarian political regime, but fade following a transition to democracy. This was the conclusion of a volume on student protest in Asia that two of the editors of this volume published over a decade ago. A common explanation for the relative prominence of student protest under authoritarianism is that students, especially university students, enjoy organizational advantages: ample free time to study political issues and organize campaigns, while concentrated on campuses, facilitating information-sharing and mobilization. Regime leaders also sometimes grant students greater (though still limited) leeway for protest compared to other social groups, recognizing their middle-class status, their presumed role as future leaders, or the place students occupy in nationalist narratives (see Weiss, Aspinall, and Thompson 2012, 10–12, for a summary of this literature). In contrast, as countries democratize, social movements and political pluralism become normalized and institutionalized. Other groups, such as labor unions, political parties, advocacy groups, and identity-based movements, gain prominence, eroding the relative advantages of students as protest actors and the rationale for their special role. Of course, there are exceptions; some societies (including some of those we cover in this volume) retain strong traditions of student and youth protest even as consolidated democracies.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, such consolidation seemed imminent in at least some countries in the region. As the global third wave of democracy, which began in parts of Southern Europe and Latin America in the

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1970s and then washed through swaths of Northeast and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, crested, protests by young people, especially students, receded from the political landscape in many countries (Weiss and Aspinall 2012). For example, student protest helped ignite democratization in Indonesia in 1998, but largely disappeared from the political scene after the regime transition (Aspinall 2012). In Thailand, students had been leading actors in antimilitary democratic struggles in the 1970s, then lost "strength and influence" (Prajak 2012, 229), even as they resumed protest in the 1990s. Similarly, in South Korea, where students were at the forefront of antiauthoritarian protests in the 1980s, post-transition, their "visibility and impact . . . declined significantly" (Min 2012, 125). What changed subsequently to propel student and youth protest back to the center of political contention? One crucial factor is the global erosion of democracy over the past 15 years, including in Asia (e.g., Waldner and Lust 2018; Mietzner 2021). Assuming various sequences and forms, this process entails "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy," leading either to "outright democratic breakdown" or creation of "ambiguously democratic or hybrid" systems (Bermeo 2016, 5–6). At the same time, already-authoritarian regimes have become more "sophisticated," enabling them better to resist pushback (Morgenbesser 2020). Civil societies have adapted, in turn, to these new regime conditions.

Such democratic decline or authoritarian consolidation has been a critical backdrop and catalyst for the reemergence of large-scale and militant youth revolts. In Myanmar, youth mobilized in response to the military coup in February 2021. Similarly, in Thailand, episodes of student protest, including the 2020–21 wave, responded to a reemplaced military-led government and the banning of the progressive Future Forward Party. In Hong Kong, the increasingly intrusive role of the government of the People's Republic of China in the territory incited rounds of mobilization, albeit as episodes in a long struggle to promote democratization and "genuine universal suffrage" in Hong Kong (Ortmann 2015, 32). In Indonesia, as Fauziah Mayangsari argues in chapter 2 (this volume), the student protest of 2019–20 both signaled resistance to democratic decline and reflected the more democratic post-1998 climate that shaped these students' upbringing (see also Aspinall 2020). Even in still-authoritarian China, where protest remains high-risk, youth have pioneered new ways to express frustration with political constraints, sexual harassment, discrimination, and declining economic prospects.

Taiwan and Timor-Leste are arguably unique, featuring relatively stable, even consolidated democracies, yet also highly influential student and youth protests. Even here, youth have mobilized against threats to demo-

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cratic freedoms. In Taiwan, the Kuomintang government's initial imposition of the Cross-Straits Agreement triggered "popular anxieties about losing political liberties" and arguably caused "collateral damage" to Taiwan's own democratic procedures (Ho 2015, 80). Meanwhile, in Timor-Leste, student protests against government policies evolved into a movement challenging Maunbootizmu, an ideology that demands respect for the older generation of male national liberators and legitimizes their political domination (Tilman and Webster, chapter 10, this volume).

Of course, the cases this book presents confirm that systemic change is not the only impetus for youth activism. Mobilization around new (or old) policy issues and identity goals (more on these efforts below) also occurs in democratic contexts and even in stable hybrid or authoritarian regimes. For instance, we see youth-led environmental, feminist, and sexuality-rights advocacy in polities such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei. These efforts reflect how youth priorities change in response to economic and social shifts, even where large-scale political change is not the main goal. Overall, however, we might take this range of cases as contributing especially to the urgent task of understanding new modes of contentious politics that arise in resistance to illiberalizing regimes (e.g., Stokke 2023; Blackington et al. 2024).

Technological Change and New Modes of Activism

Another obvious difference between the youth and student protesters since the 2010s and their predecessors—and part of the reason why democratic regression has prompted such resistance—is that this is the first generation of "digital natives," who grew up with the internet and social media. The use of these technologies has infused and shaped contemporary social movements. Recent waves of protest began after social-media use had become near universal among students and other middle-class youths across the region. This context matters in at least three ways.

First, the ubiquity of social media and the ease of online communication have fostered a strong sense of generational identity among youth across the region. As Yatun Sastramidjaja (2025, 7) notes, "Generally, for this generation, 'being digital' is an intrinsic part of their identity and everyday life, especially as the boundaries between 'online' and 'offline' worlds dissolved with the rise of smartphones." Gen(eration) Z protesters share protest memes, ideas, and symbols widely and instantly online, often across national borders. They have drawn expansively on styles and symbols expropriated from global pop culture, such as the three-finger salute from the

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Hunger Games film franchise or K-pop songs and dance styles, accentuating the sense of generational conflict that infuses these movements—as several chapters in this volume make clear.

Second, most of the protest movements studied in this volume unfolded not only on the streets but also online, with waves of viral, critical commentary and "hashtag activism" accompanying physical demonstrations. Activists flooded digital space with slogans, memes, petitions, and manifestos, but also mobilized through social-media platforms, including by sharing images and videos of themselves and others at street protests. Vibrant protest cultures and styles sprang up, drawing heavily on those of communities with a strong online presence (such as K-pop fans or queer activists), but feeding back into them as protesters shared "jocular visuals" manifesting their various identities and causes (Beta and Ramirez forthcoming).

Online and offline protests were also connected in other ways. In Hong Kong, for example, those engaged in online movement politics were more likely to spend time in the occupied areas, encourage others to participate, and be "more active in both frontline activism and support provision" (Lee and Chan 2016, 17). Hsiao's (2018) study of Taiwan's Sunflower Movement helps to explain this connection. He found that engagement with movement politics on social media fostered a sense of anger, activist identity, peer pressure to join demonstrations, and personal efficacy—the belief that one could contribute to the movement. Such personal efficacy, in particular, drove youth to participate in street demonstrations.

Third, the rise of online communication has revolutionized protest organization. Digital media have empowered individuals to engage with causes and movements on their own terms, without relying on centralized organizations or leadership (Cheng and Yuen 2025). The result is more a decentralized form of activism, or "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2021). Forms of connective action feature in almost all the episodes examined in this book, with patterns of organization tending to be less hierarchical and formal than in the past. For example, formal student unions and councils have been less prominent, or less consistently so, than previously. Instead, ad hoc, decentralized, and horizontal forms of networking have tended to predominate. Online networking also facilitates fluid and flexible patterns of physical protest, helping activists coordinate flash mobs and other tactics, avoid (or at least be aware of) security forces, and share tips for dealing with tear gas, water cannons, and other hazards. In short, knowledge of new communication technologies (NCTs) has equipped youth with skills to shape and direct protest movements. As Chow's chapter illustrates, for instance, young Hongkongers leveraged NCTs to decentralize the pro-democracy movement and sideline older generations.

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Overall, new technologies and the new generational consciousness that accompanied them have enabled what Sastramidjaja (2025, 3–4) calls "rhizomatic processes of decentralized and interconnected activism." Other scholars have gone further, arguing that the latest protests have shown a "democratizing role" for social media, "in building up dissent, cultivating a common consciousness and identity for a cause, and disseminating dissenting views and insurgent activities" (Lee, So, and Leung 2015, 371). Most of the chapters in this volume concur, pointing to manifold ways in which online organization, networking, and dissemination have offered scaffolds for sustaining student and youth protest.

We should not overstate the transformative effects of NCTs (see Gerbaudo 2022). Face-to-face organizing remains crucial, as chapters here also make clear. For example, Horatanakun (chapter 3) outlines the long history of grassroots activism and interregional networking that underpinned youth protests in Thailand. In Indonesia, universities' elected student executive bodies are still key organizers (as Mayangsari, chapter 2, and Kartika, chapter 8, explain), as are issue-oriented student clubs in Singapore (as Yew and Yang, chapter 13, detail). Even primarily online movements seek physical, sometimes confrontational, protest.

Moreover, authoritarian regimes, state security forces, and other movement opponents have adapted quickly, employing online surveillance, harassment, and disruption to challenge movements across the region—including prosecuting activists for online criticism of authority figures (Sombatpoonsiri 2024). Nevertheless, the power of online presence has given activists a degree of resilience and flexibility in the face of increasingly sophisticated efforts to monitor and repress protest. Perhaps most strikingly, virtual platforms have facilitated a high degree of transnational networking and solidarity across national boundaries (Teeratanabodee, chapter 6, this volume), and provided greater space for previously marginalized groups of actors, such as feminists and LGBTQ youth, to build identity and community. It is this shift in scale and the "we" of protest that perhaps most clearly marks a change in how activists approach, and how scholars should understand, contemporary claims-making.

Transnational Networking

Transnational connections among student and youth activists in the region date back at least to the early years of leftist youth activism and underground anticolonial networks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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centuries (e.g., Anderson 2007), but also continued sporadically throughout the Cold War period and beyond (Weiss, Aspinall, and Thompson 2012, 25–28). However, the advent of social media and online communication has dramatically amplified these cross-border collaborations, making them a defining feature of the latest wave of activism. This increased connectivity has profoundly shaped the timing, scale, tactics, and cultural forms of recent movements in novel ways.

We find clear interconnections among waves of protest in different locations, with activists deliberately forging transnational alliances. A prime example is the close bond that formed between protest movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong early in the protest cycle. United by shared concerns over the looming threat of an authoritarian People's Republic of China and a desire to assert local identity, activists traveled between the two locations, sharing inspiration and tactics (Fung 2014). As one observer noted, these mid-2010s protests "accelerated a multi-level framework of cooperation between civil society groups in Hong Kong and Taiwan, including exchanges between student leaders" (Kaeding 2015, 215).

The Milk Tea Alliance, formed in 2020, represents an even larger wave of transnational solidarity, connecting activists from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Myanmar. Using hashtags such as #MilkTeaAlliance, primarily on Twitter, young activists shared protest stories, images, and tactics, seeking to learn from, inspire, and support one another. United by democratic goals and opposition to authoritarianism, particularly Chinese influence, this loose, leaderless, structurally borderless network exemplifies the power of NCTs, including their ability to foster shared identity and provide ballast against repression (Teeratanabodee, this volume; Kreutz and Makrogianni 2024).

Beyond such coalitions and human connections, we also find cross-border cultural diffusion behind novel transnational symbols, discourses, and referents. Hallyu, or the "Korean wave," that has been rising regionally (and then globally) since the late 1990s, is perhaps the most emblematic of this genre of transnationalism. K-pop, a key part of this wave, "has evolved as a system that embodies transnational production and consumption" (Yoon 2023, 396). By now, the activism of K-pop fans, or "stans," across the region manifests itself in readily transmittable and mutually comprehensible, digitally mediated messaging and iconography, engendering "everyday experiences of transnationalism" (Yoon 2023, 400). While the music itself is rarely political, its mostly young fans are "digitally literate" and politically aware; having organized digital campaigns around their "idols" (artists) they "can efficiently mobilize a large number of online users" (Vanderberg 2020). K-pop stans in Southeast Asia have embraced sometimes quirky, innovative tactics,

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from pasting birthday messages to K-pop idols on tuk-tuks in protesting the lack of train service during democracy protests in Thailand in 2020 (Andini and Akhni 2021, 45), to disseminating messages against Indonesia's Omnibus Bill on Job Creation that same year through their social-media networks (Beta and Ramirez 2023). These latter civic education efforts sent hashtags about the proposed law trending globally on Twitter and helped to "shape a netizen cluster together with political parties, labor organizations, activists, and students that exclusively talked about [the] Omnibus Law" (Andini and Akhni 2021, 50).

Social media and online technologies were crucial to what Teeratanabodee calls in her chapter a "massification" of transnational solidarity, allowing ordinary protesters and sympathizers to express their support for kindred movements. However, even in the transnational sphere, again, we should not lose sight of the importance of in-person networking. Activists still travel between countries for meetings, workshops, and protests at least as much as previous generations (see, e.g., Tuwanont 2024). Easier and cheaper cross-border travel has undoubtedly facilitated this aspect of activism in the region, just as new platforms simplify cross-border cultural sharing of music, films, and more.

This decade of protest has thus witnessed an unusual degree of transnational connectivity across East and Southeast Asia—rivaled only by the Communist and New Left movements of the past. What also distinguishes this face of contemporary activism is its discursive and cultural dimensions, which allow for a rare but potent form of regional connectivity from below. This premise has helped to foster not only a seeming diffusion and firmer articulation of identity categories and claims but also new alliances across issues and actors. It is to these developments that we turn next.

Identity Politics and Coalition Building

Another striking distinction between many contemporary protest movements and their predecessors is their overtly intersectional nature. In earlier protest waves, student protesters often emphasized their identity as students—especially as university students—and its connection to broader nationalist narratives (see Weiss and Aspinall 2012). Recent protest movements, by contrast, have often emphasized much less of an exclusive university-student identity or have been quintessentially coalitional, or both. For example, high school students have gained prominence, particularly in Hong Kong (Chow,

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chapter 1, this volume) and Thailand (Kanokrat 2021; Aim 2021, 196), but also in Indonesia (Ridha 2020). Yet an undergraduate identity still features where it offers political leverage, especially in more authoritarian settings. For example, the youth climate activists in Singapore that Bertrand Seah examines in chapter 9 play up their undergraduate status to bring policy-oriented research to the table. Elsewhere, as noted above, participants may instead emphasize a broader generational identity, such as by drawing on shared pop-cultural references.

More specifically, these protest movements have often foregrounded feminist and LGBTQ students, as well as groups identifying with diverse youth subcultures (including less "progressive" right-wing or religious subcultures), or advocated for the environment or other causes. This diversity has resulted in visually striking street protests. Early postcoup demonstrations in Myanmar, for instance, included "cosplay parades featuring Weebs, Femboys, Marvel and Disney characters, and Dinosaurs intermixed with parades of drag queens, LGBTQ protesters, cartoon artists with giant cartoon figures, dog owners, and snake and iguana owners" (Jordt et al. 2021, 12–13). Across the region, observers of recent movements have drawn attention to protesters' wide-ranging demands and their often carnivalesque (Beta and Ramirez 2023) or sharing-oriented approach. For instance, Teeratanabodee (2021, 4–5) describes Mob Fest, "an iconic feature" of street protests in Thailand in which different groups promoted their agendas via booths showcasing "presentations, discussion and performances."

While many of these movements have cohered around narrowly focused core demands, they have embraced multipronged wider agendas. As Sastramidjaja (2025, 7) writes of Indonesia: "Freedom of expression, civil and human rights, social justice, labour rights, women's and LGBTQ rights, digital rights, free access to quality education and information, indigenous rights, ecological justice, and other issues that were frequently addressed by activist youth in Indonesia, as elsewhere, came to be recognized not as separate issues but as structurally connected collective causes." Similarly, Teeratanabodee (2023, 3) observes that protesters in Thailand developed a critique of "powerism," or practices that mimic the "unequal power relations" of authoritarianism. Activists critique not only "the monarchy, military, and government" but also "social institutions, such as the family, school, workplace, and legal and economic institutions." Still, today's movements are not immune to the tensions and exclusions that have historically plagued cross-cutting campaigns. For example, while many Thai protesters earnestly address issues of intersectional disempowerment and marginaliza-

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tion, women still encounter sexism, gender-based harassment, and patriarchal norms even among the ranks of ostensibly progressive activists (Duanghathai 2023, 214–15).

While we cannot offer definitive answers as to why these new identity claims and coalitional politics have flourished, we can speculate, in part based on experiences elsewhere over time. First, long-standing theories of "postmaterial" values (e.g., Inglehart 1990) and identity-based "new social movements" (Offe 1985; Buechler 1995) carry weight, however contested and incomplete (Pichardo 1997). Broadly speaking, it is plausible that, as East and Southeast Asian societies have developed economically, generations raised without omnipresent precarity, or under democratic rather than authoritarian regimes, have found new goals more galvanizing. Reinforcing this trend, online forms of communication provide space for minority or previously suppressed political identities to take shape and build connections, both within and across countries, including by borrowing globalized terms (e.g., "LGBTQ"). Unlike in the past, when relatively centralized and hierarchical student and youth organizations shaped demands, now anybody with a smartphone, an artistic sensibility, or a witty communicative style can influence movement identity (see Beta and Ramirez 2023).

Even where identity-oriented advocacy movements developed earlier, they have taken on new forms, especially with the core identity's expansion from *students* to *youth*, as mobilization transcends university campuses. In South Korea, for instance, a new feminist movement emerged in the late 2010s, immersed in a culture of street protest but with "a clear generation gap between the current youths and the older generation of student movements." In particular, participants in recent protests have included "women and girls from broader backgrounds" than the undergraduates of the past (Joo 2018, 412).

Old patterns may leave residues, however. In Hong Kong and Taiwan in particular, youth movements continue to prioritize traditional forms of "national" identity construction, largely in opposition to China's actual or threatened encroachment. Even so, this threat has shaped distinct generational patterns. As Shue Fung Chow argues in chapter 1, recent student protest in Hong Kong has largely organized around an emerging Hong Kong identity, whereas an earlier generation of "pan-democrats" framed the struggle to democratize Hong Kong as part of a larger effort to reform China. More broadly, in challenging established political modes and institutions, young people across the region have actively imagined new forms of national identity and belonging. Witness, for example, the challenge to the monarchy posed by protestors in Thailand, or the new emphasis on cross-ethnic

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solidarity in Myanmar's postcoup resistance that Tamas Wells and Pan Hsu Pyae Eain detail in chapter 4.

Structure of the Volume

Commonalities notwithstanding, student and youth movements across Northeast and Southeast Asia since the mid-2010s have manifested in diverse ways. This volume aims to capture that variety, from sites at the forefront of youth revolt and those places less hospitable to activism. Some chapters zero in on specific aspects of activism; others focus on discrete identity dimensions; still others analyze the evolution of activism in a particular country. To help readers navigate this range of themes and topics, we have organized the chapters into three sections.

The first group of chapters, "Revival," examines countries leading the resurgence of student and youth protest over the last decade. We start with Hong Kong, the site of some of the earliest and most spectacular, recurrent, and influential protests of the period. Shue Fung Chow (chapter 1) traces how the emergence of a generational and ideological shift within the pro-democracy movement enabled this decadelong upsurge of revolutionary (but ultimately repressed) protest. Next, Fauziah Mayangsari (chapter 2) charts the revival of student protest in Indonesia in 2019–20, students' first major return to the national political stage since their leading role in overthrowing authoritarianism and initiating a transition to democracy in 1998–99. We then turn to Thailand, another site of spectacular, and in some respects unprecedently radical, student protest. Akanit Horatanakun (chapter 3) homes in on how Thai feminist mobilization, which was integral to the wider upsurge, succeeded in achieving abortion-law reform while the larger student movement failed to achieve its goals of fundamental constitutional change. Next, Pan Hsu Pyae Eain and Tamas Wells (chapter 4) turn our attention to Myanmar and how students and youth in the postcoup resistance are imagining new forms of interethnic unity and reconciliation. Finally, rounding out this section, Ming-sho Ho and Chun-Ching Tu (chapter 5) revisit Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Movement to examine its lasting impact. They zero in on the subsequent life and career trajectories of a set of core movement activists to trace the interplay of ideals, political change, and individuals' life courses in the wake of a pivotal movement.

The next group of chapters focuses on "Innovation," the novel protest repertoires and coalitional dynamics that activists have deployed in the region since the mid-2010s. First is Wichuta Teeratanabodee's analysis

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(chapter 6) of the Milk Tea Alliance, a novel transnational network that, as noted above, brought together youth from across Thailand, Hong Kong, and Myanmar. While NCTs facilitated the alliance, Teeratanabodee finds its roots in a long history of connections among civil society actors across the three locations. We then turn to the Philippines, where Yatun Sastramidjaja, Sarah Faith Rulloda, and Giselle Manuel (chapter 7) examine how the COVID-19 pandemic revitalized Filipino youth activism by bringing a new generation of digital activists into traditional left-wing organizations. This influx, the authors argue, has initiated a complex process of "rerooting" in established ideologies and "rerouting" through innovative digital means, potentially transforming the landscape of Filipino youth activism. Next, Dyah Ayu Kartika (chapter 8) points to tensions between Indonesian student feminists and Islamists—both groups that had gained influence on campuses during the preceding decades of democratic openness—that crystallized over a proposed anti-sexual-violence law. Bertrand Seah's analysis of youth-based environmental activism (chapter 9) then traces how participants foreground research within their activist practice, both to gain legitimacy in Singapore's relatively constrained political environment and to critique technocratic approaches to environmental governance. To conclude this section, Berta Antonieta Tilman Pereira and David Webster (chapter 10) draw our attention to an episode of student protest at Timor-Leste's major national university. In this protest—which echoes earlier postcolonial student protests elsewhere in Southeast Asia—they see youth disillusionment with a consolidating postindependence elite.

The final set of chapters, on "Adaptation," explores student and youth activism under less supportive political opportunity structures—or at least where regime-challenging mass protests have been impossible. We start in Malaysia. Nur Adilla (chapter 11) examines the intersection of gender and religious identity from the angle of how young Muslim women in Malaysia find ways to campaign on various causes (e.g., the environment, democratic rights) while simultaneously promoting women's equality. We turn next to neighboring Brunei, an absolute monarchy rarely included in discussions of social movements or civil society. Mu'izz Abdul Khalid (chapter 12) shows how, through various forms of "quiet activism," some young people in this oil-rich state have creatively advanced new forms of citizenship and sought to shape the public political agenda. Similarly, in their analysis of Singapore, Joel Yew and Daryl WJ Yang (chapter 13) point to the subtle reemergence of student activism, amid generally authoritarian political conditions. Students pursue "contained contention": they operate largely within regime-approved mechanisms, but with the potential to develop more transgressive modes of

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action. In the next chapter we return to the Philippines. Including the Philippines alongside Brunei and Singapore may seem counterintuitive, given the country's raucously contentious politics. However, Juhn Chris P. Espia (chapter 14) sketches a relatively barren landscape of student and youth activism in the Philippines. He points especially to the historical hegemony of the far left on Philippine campuses, which has tended to squeeze out alternative forms of political action (though he suggests this condition is increasingly being challenged). Finally, concluding this section and our volume, Teresa Wright (chapter 15) examines China, a country with a rich and important history of student and youth protest, but where, in recent times, youth have been less politically volatile. Comparing this period to the politically contentious era that spanned the mid-1970s to 1989, she argues that the political opportunity structure has tilted decisively against contentious action, but that future youth protest cannot be ruled out.

Indeed, that final caveat may well be the key motif this recent wave of activism suggests: however seemingly ideologically moribund, structurally disabled, or simply out-of-fashion, youth and student protest seems destined to cycle endlessly back to center stage. New threats and aspirations, new technologies and tactics, new subcultures and communities, and new techniques of state evasion or suppression will continue to percolate. Whatever its effects, that wave will surely build on this new set of legacies, once again reshaping the region's politics.

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